

## Over the River and Through the Woods by Duck\_Life

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**Summary:**

Will deliberates about bringing his boyfriend to Thanksgiving dinner. Hopper tries to deep-fry the turkey. Jonathan, Nancy and Steve's son won't look up from his Game Boy. Set in 2002.

## Over the River and Through the Woods

NOVEMBER 25, 2002

The kid in front of him is bright-eyed and babbling, the most recent issue of “The Mind Flayer” clutched in his hands. “... and honestly I’ve always thought the way you capture their facial expressions is *phenomenal*, I’m such a big fan honestly, and is it true that you might be working with William Denbrough on an upcoming series because that would honestly be amazing...”

You would think that after eight years in the comic book industry, Will Byers would have gotten sick of kids like this, but he still hasn’t. It’s just a lot to take, sometimes. “Nothing’s been decided,” he says quickly, cutting off the young fan before he can get too excited. “Obviously I would *love* to work with Bill Denbrough, but until Dark Knight says something I can’t say anything.” The kid nods understandably, eyes wide. “Here, I can sign that for you.”

While Will’s signing his name in a loopy scrawl across the image of the moon on the comic cover, his boyfriend Wyatt waves from the other end of the con table and then points to his phone. Wyatt mouths, *Your sister*.

“Gotcha,” Will says to him before turning back to the kid. “Have a good rest of the convention, alright? And stay safe.”

He says that a lot.

“She texted and said her flight landed early,” Wyatt explains while Will puts on his jacket. “I can take over from here, passing out buttons and stuff.”

“You’re the best,” Will says warmly. He kisses Wyatt goodbye, grabs his phone and bolts for the door, the parking garage waiting beyond it. Indianapolis is cold right now, not quite Christmassy weather but getting there. (The radio plays Wham!’s “Last Christmas” on his way to the airport, though, so that’s a good start.)

He parks outside baggage claim and hurries in, tugging his jacket

closer around himself. Will got taller as he got older but he's still just as skinny as always, thin wrists poking out from his heavy coat. He scans the atrium a few times before he spots a familiar woman in a thick flannel jacket, her hair a wild tangle of curls.

Her attention is on the baggage carousel, searching for her bag, so Will takes the opportunity to be a little mischievous. He sneaks up behind her, unable to hide his grin, and swiftly puts his hands over her eyes. "Guess who."

Jane Wheeler screams and jerks away, and Will gets *pushed* several feet back, falling backward on his ass as his sister finally turns around and recognizes him. "Will! Goddamit, I told you not to do that."

Will's laughing as she helps him up. "I'm sorry, I forgot," he says, hoping no one in the airport noticed the little show of telekinesis. "Been a while. Been too long."

"Too long," she agrees, pulling him into a tight hug.

She still looks young to him, like she didn't get older, just stronger and smarter. Will, on the other hand, has enough stress lines under his eyes for the both of them. "Where's that no-good husband of yours?"

"Mike's still in Boston," she says, turning her attention back to the baggage carousel. "He has to work til Wednesday." She spots her suitcase and grabs it. Will tries to carry it for her but she just rolls her eyes and blows past him, carting her luggage without any difficulty. "How's Wyatt?"

"He's good," Will says, walking briskly to keep up with her. "Got a haircut."

"Will I get to see it tonight?" she says shrewdly. Will opens the trunk of his car so she can toss her suitcase in. She straightens up and looks at him, eyes blazing, and Will frowns. She always had that way of looking at people like she was looking *through* them, and after all these years it still unnerves him.

“He’s not coming.”

“ *Will* .”

“They don’t know!” Will sighs, sliding into the car while Jane grumpily joins him in the passenger’s seat. “I’m not about to ruin everyone’s Thanksgiving by showing up like, ‘Hey, here’s my boyfriend who I live with and also am in love with. Pass the yams.’”

“That’s exactly what you should do.” She props her feet up on the dash as Will pulls out of the airport parking lot. “It’s not like they don’t know about you. You’re not coming out again, just... sharing good news.”

“‘Good news,’” he sighs. “I just don’t want to have to listen to them talk about ‘Wyatt,’ you know how they’ll say his name like that, with their teeth clenched, the way Hopper used to talk about Mike when you guys first started dating. Remember that? He’d be like, ‘Have fun with *Mike* tonight.’ Or, ‘Oh good, *Mike* ’s coming over.’”

“He got over that,” she insists. The radio dial twirls seemingly of its own accord, switching Will’s Christmas pop station to one playing punk rock. “And he’ll get over this. And so will Joyce. And they’ll be *happy* for you.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“They’re cool with Jonathan and his... situation.”

“That’s different,” Will says.

“Wyatt won’t push you,” she goes on. “But he wants you to tell them, too.”

Will glances over at her. “How do you know?”

“He told me,” she says matter-of-factly. “We’re AOL Instant Messenger buddies. And AOL Instant Messenger buddies—”

“Don’t lie?” Will finishes flatly. “Yeah, yeah. I’ll tell them, El. In my own time.” Still with her feet on the dashboard, Jane smiles a tiny, quiet smile at the old, old nickname.

Hopper and Joyce live in a little house just outside of the city, close enough to Hawkins to be comfortable but... well, far away enough from Hawkins to be comfortable. Will pulls into the driveway and parks beside his mom's Volvo. He cuts the ignition before looking over at Jane.

"I just don't think I'm ready for them to know about Wyatt."

"I think you are," Jane counters in her stubborn way. She smiles. "And if, for whatever reason, they start acting weird, I'll tell them about the time I got stoned in high school and microwaved Hopper's records. That'll take the attention off you."

Will shakes his head. "You really did that?"

She shrugs, completely unabashed.

They go in.

The hallway is lined with framed photographs: Jane, Jonathan and Will, Hopper and Joyce's wedding picture, the kids all together, some artsy photos Jonathan won awards for, Jane and Mike. Mixed in there are a few of Will's drawings, several of them embarrassingly old. (Beside his high school graduation photo, the "rainbow ship" from his eighth birthday is hung with pride.)

"You're here!" Joyce practically shrieks from the kitchen, tossing a dishtowel on the counter before running through the dining room to get to them. "Oh, you're here, you're here." She pulls Will into a hug, the flour mixed into her graying hair smudging onto his jacket. "It's so good to see you, sweetie," she says with a smile before turning to Jane and hugging her. She runs a hand affectionately through Jane's curls before kissing her on the cheek. "How was your flight?"

"Fast," Jane says, sniffing the air. "Apple pie?"

"Yes!" Joyce says hectically, like she forgot for a moment she had the oven on. "Yes, it's my grandma's recipe. Hop!" she yells. "The kids are here!"

Will swipes a cookie from the jar on the counter while his mother checks on the pie. Soon enough, his stepdad slides open the door to

the backyard and comes in. In eighteen years, he's lost most of his hair and none of his belly. Hopper grins when he sees the kids and he scoops Jane up in a bear hug.

"What were you doing outside?" Will says after getting his own hug from Hopper.

"Checking on the deep fryer," he explains. "We're deep-frying a turkey this year. It's gonna be awesome."

"Sounds delicious," Will says, but he's thinking *Sounds dangerous* . "Hey, when's Jonathan getting here?"

"Uh, the Dream Team's supposed to be getting in around... six, seven, eight...?"

"Seven," Jane says confidently after a moment of deliberation.

Joyce takes the apple pie out of the oven. When she sees Will going in for a second cookie she scowls at him. "Will! You'll ruin your appetite. Those are for your nephew."

Jonathan is the first one in the door, promptly at seven like Jane predicted. Close behind him are Nancy and Steve, and trailing behind them comes Tucker, eight years old and completely engrossed in his Game Boy Advance.

"Hey there," Jonathan says to Will, hugging him before passing him off to his partners for hugs all around. Will gets a thump on the back from his brother-in-law and a kiss on the cheek from his sister-in-law.

Tucker makes no notice that Will's even there.

"Hi, Tuck," Jane says, crouching down in front of him to get eye level. He doesn't look up from his game. Jane raises an eyebrow and Tucker's Game Boy goes zooming out of his hands and into hers.

"Hey!" he whines.

"Say hi to your aunt," Steve says, ruffling his son's hair before moving further into the house to say hello to Joyce and Hopper.

And then it's drinks and Trivial Pursuit and anecdote after anecdote and *plenty* of food. Jane becomes enthralled by Tucker's video game and he spends most of the night teaching her to play it. Steve, Nancy and Jonathan talk over each other trying to relay the story of their recent trip to Canada and Nancy's job at the newspaper and their son's foray into third grade.

It's almost midnight when Will calls it a night, letting his family know he'll be back tomorrow, and anyone who needs it is welcome to his couch.

Jane declines the offer with a sleepy, "I'm comfy," from her spot stretched out on the sofa. Will gets another kiss from his mom before heading out into the chilly night.

Wyatt's still awake when Will gets back to their apartment. "Hi," he says, pulling his boyfriend down to the couch. "How was it?"

"Good," Will says evasively. He takes a deep breath and then starts, "I'm sorry..."

"It's okay," Wyatt says, eyes round and gentle like he really means it. "I get it, I really do. I'm not here to push you, Will."

Will settles into the crook of his arms, guilt and anxiety swarming like fireflies in his stomach. "I just... I can't handle them looking at me and talking about me like there's something wrong," he sighs. "I had too much of that growing up. I love you. I want to tell the whole world how much I—"

"I know," Wyatt says, just as gentle as before. "It's okay, Will. Becca and I are volunteering at the kitchen all day Thursday. But you come home that night... I'll have a whole turkey, just for you and me. And we can have our own Thanksgiving, and we'll have leftovers until... hell, probably until Valentine's Day."

"Sounds good." When Will bends up to kiss him, the fireflies in his stomach calm down just a little bit.

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The next day, while Jane and Nancy are on the couch trading Mike stories and Steve's outside with Hopper and the deep fryer and Joyce is teaching her grandson how to make Mexican corn, Will and Jonathan take a walk.

"Tuck won an art contest at school," Jonathan says, thumbs sticking in his pockets. He sounds mostly casual, but Will doesn't miss the immense pride thrumming through his older brother. "Pencil drawing. He's really good. And Nance is trying to get him to stick with the flute, but I dunno. I think he's getting sick of music class."

Will grins. "He's probably wondering if he should stay or if he should go."

"Har-har." Jonathan bumps his shoulder. Brown and orange leaves swirl around them on the ground. "Will, you know... you can tell us anything. You can tell *me* anything."

"I know," Will says too quickly. Jonathan gives him a pointed look, and it's eerily similar to Jane's way of peering *through* you. Blood or not, they really are all siblings. "Just... just... I mean, Mom and Hop already know I'm gay in theory. But in practice? This... this is the first time I've ever *really* been in love, for real. It's a big deal. I can't just say it."

"I understand," Jonathan says, noticing the dubious look from Will. "I *do* . You know how hard it was to tell them I wasn't *just* dating Nancy? But they handled it. And they'll handle you and... what's his name?"

Will bites the inside of his cheek, suddenly nervous, but Jonathan doesn't stop looking at him. "Wyatt."

"Wyatt," Jonathan repeats. "Will and Wyatt. Wyatt and Will. That's adorable."

"Stop."

"You guys should have a sitcom."

"Shut up," Will laughs, shoving his brother. Jonathan stumbles back by the curb and then retaliates by kicking a pile of leaves toward



Will, and soon they're scuffling in the street like they could be kids again, laughing, bickering, building Castle Byers.

Hopper pulls out his nice cigars that night, passes them around to Jonathan, Steve and Will (and Jane, when she asks, although his eyes narrow). The five of them sit on the back porch in companionable quiet, watching the smoke build and billow around them like a growing fog. Late autumn sun glances off the deep fryer sitting in the middle of the dead grass.

"You remember the kid Mike and I fostered last year?" Jane says after a long puff on her cigar. "He got adopted a month or so ago. Sweet boy."

"How are your cases going?" Hopper asks her.

Jane shrugs. "Mostly good," she says. "Just... there's this one girl. We're trying to reach out to her, get her away from her uncle. He's..." She searches for the word.

"Shitty?" Steve supplies.

Jane grins. "Yeah. Shitty."

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Nancy, Will and Jane pile into Joyce's Volvo at noon on Wednesday to go get Mike from the airport. He shows up at baggage claim looking too-cool with his sunglasses on and a sleek leather jacket. (Nancy's quick to ruin the image by tackling him and giving him a noogie.) Mike dramatically dips and kisses his wife, causing her to erupt in giggles, and then he goes and gives Will a bone-crushing hug.

"Good to see you, Byers," Mike says, straightening his sunglasses.

"Back at ya."

They drive back to the house, loudly hollering along to Christmas songs.

When Mike opens the door, he immediately gets a big hug from Joyce and a slice of pumpkin pie thrust into his hands. "It's so good to see you," she gushes. "How was the flight?"

Mike shrugs. "Alright." He kisses her on the cheek and hugs Hopper and then goes after Tucker, pulling a comic book out of his bag. "Hey, kid. I got you the latest X-Men."

Tucker looks up from the Toys "R" Us catalogue he's been circling (Jane bogarted his Game Boy). "Did you read it already?"

Mike goes red. "I'm an adult," he says. "I don't read comics anymore."

"Okay," Tucker says, not looking like he believes it. "Thanks, Uncle Mike." He takes the comic and switches it out with his catalogue while Mike goes to say hi to Jonathan.

"Hey, man," Jonathan says, clapping him on the back. "So," he says conspiratorily, "what's Cyclops up to these days?"

Mike grimaces but then tells him, "Not so good. He's cheating on Jean Grey."

"What a jerk," Jonathan says. He laughs, but then he eyes Mike a little more seriously. "Can't believe he'd do that, though, what with Jean Grey being able to move shit around with her mind. Just doesn't sound like a good idea, messing with her, you know?" He shrugs.

"We still talking about Jean Grey?"

"Mm."

"Oh, leave him alone," Jane laughs then, hitting Jonathan lightly on the arm and winding an arm around her husband.

"Just joking," Jonathan says, cuffing Mike on the shoulder. "Alright, now that everyone's here, let's get a picture."

They stand in the backyard, Hopper and Joyce in the center surrounded by Jonathan and Steve, with Mike and Nancy on the left and Jane and Will squatted down in front. The timer on Jonathan's

camera ticks down, three, two, one, and then there's the flash.

At night, Will wanders out to the back porch with a cup of his mom's eggnog and he ends up running into Mike. "Oh. Hey."

"Hey." Mike's got his own cup of eggnog. (Will's pretty sure it's his third cup.) "So. El told me about Wyatt." Will says nothing, just takes a sip of his eggnog. It's not exactly a secret, but he was kind of intentional in telling his brother and sister, *just* his brother and sister. "Is it... okay that I know?"

Will shrugs. "Yeah, as long as you don't make a big deal about it."

"Of course I'm gonna make a big deal about it," Mike says. "You're living with a guy! This is the first time you're living with someone, right? That's huge. Congrats. I'm so happy for you, man."

"R-really?" Will says, coughing a little on his sip of nog. And it's not like he doesn't *know* Mike. It's not like he expected Mike to be weird and uncomfortable and homophobic. Just... he figured Mike would do his jerky little head-bob and say something like, "Oh, that's nice." He definitely didn't expect congratulations.

"Of course," Mike says, looping him into a loose hug. "I'm excited for you. Oof, but kinda worried too... The biggest fight El and I ever got into was the day after we moved in together." At Will's worried expression, he shrugs and smiles down at his wedding band. "But, you know. Everything worked out."

"Yeah." Will sighs and sips his eggnog. "I think things'll be good... really good. Just..."

"Your folks don't know?" Mike guesses, and he didn't need Jane to tell him that. "I mean they *know*. But they don't know about Wyatt specifically."

"Yeah."

"Got it," Mike says. He smiles. "When you're ready to tell them... they're gonna be happy for you, too, man."

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Will arrives at his parents' house the next day late in the morning. Nancy's flying around the kitchen, flour dusting her hair and face, a sweet potato stain on her blouse. "Hey!" she says brightly. "I think Jane's in the living room setting up some board games with the munchkin. She wanted you to play too."

So Will passes the beginning of Thanksgiving Day playing Parcheesi with his nephew and sister, listening to the sound of the Macy's parade drift through from the TV in the other room. Around one in the afternoon, Hopper marches outside with Mike and Tucker trailing him.

It's time to deep fry the turkey.

Will and Jane watch from the porch while Hopper lowers the turkey into the fryer, and it's a good thing they are— because a second later, the whole thing goes up in flames. Oil splashes upward and onto his arms and fire blooms out from the fryer.

"SHIT," Hopper yells. Everything happens so fast, and Will thinks he might be screaming but he's not sure. Mike grabs Tucker and carts him off the lawn. Steve runs out of the house wielding a fire extinguisher.

With a flick of her hand, Jane sends her dad sailing across the lawn and safely away from the fire.

When the smoke finally clears, there's a big brown patch of burned grass, and the turkey is irrevocably ruined.

The whole thing takes about two minutes.

"Goddammit," Hopper says as Joyce hovers around him trying to inspect his arm. Fortunately, his arm doesn't look much worse than if he'd touched a hot stove. "I'm fine, I'm fine. And I'm sorry, Joyce. That was..."

"Stupid," Jane finishes, watching from a few feet away with her arms folded.

“Yeah,” Hopper sighs, looking at the mangled remains of their Thanksgiving dinner. “Stupid.”

Joyce drags her husband to the bathroom to put some cream on his burn, leaving the rest of them clustered around the kitchen, occasionally glancing forlornly out the window at the scorched patch in the yard.

Nancy looks from Jonathan to Steve, Tucker looks up at his parents and then at his aunt, Will looks at Mike, Mike looks at Jane. They’ve got plenty of side dishes, sure. And really, all that matters is that Hopper’s okay.

But damn, everyone was looking forward to that turkey.

“All the stores are closed at this point,” Nancy says, stress-eating from the tin of fried onions. “There’s no way we’re getting a turkey today.”

Will looks up at Jane, and he can tell that she knows what he’s thinking. “Um,” Will says, addressing his family: his brother, his best friend, his favorite babysitter, his sister-in-law, his nephew and the sister he never knew he needed. “I might know how we can get a turkey.”

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One phone call and half an hour later, Wyatt arrives at the Hopper house, turkey in hand.

“Hi,” Will says, slipping outside to hug and kiss him. “I’m so sorry for pulling you away from the kitchen, Wy, you’re a lifesaver.”

“Absolutely,” Wyatt says. “I’m just glad your stepdad’s okay.” He hands the turkey over. “Give Jane my best. I’ll see—”

“W-wait, you’re not coming in?” Will says, looking absurdly small holding the big turkey. “Come on, we’ve got coffee brewing. The pie’s good.”

“You said you weren’t ready for your family to meet me,” he says, not bitter, not sad. Just very matter-of-fact. “It’s okay, Will, really.”

Will looks at his boyfriend, the man he's spent the last year and a half falling in love with. He looks at him, and he thinks. And when he's finally got his words all in order in his head, he speaks.

"Wyatt, Hopper almost died today."

"I think that's overstating things..."

"Thanksgiving is the leading day for home fires involving cooking equipment, Wyatt!"

Wyatt chuckles at that. "Okay, okay, go on. Hopper almost died today."

"Yeah, and I realized... if he died and I never got to introduce you to him... I'd feel, uh..."

"Shitty?" Wyatt finishes for him.

Will smiles. "Yeah," he says. "Shitty." And then he shoulders the door open and lets Wyatt inside.

Jane just about tackles Wyatt into a hug. "You're here, you're here," she crows, kissing him on the cheek before whirling him around toward Mike. "Mike, this is Wyatt!"

"El, can I introduce my own damn boyfriend?" Will jibes, poking her playfully in the side. Jane rolls her eyes but steps aside so Jonathan, Steve and Nancy can meet Wyatt. "Hey guys... this is Wyatt. My, uh, boyfriend. Wyatt, this is my brother, Jonathan, my sister-in-law, Nancy, and my brother-in-law, Steve. And of course you know Jane, and that guy right there is her husband Mike."

Mike waves. Wyatt waves back, bobbing his head in greeting to Will's family. "I brought a turkey."

"Damn, Will, your boyfriend just saved Thanksgiving," Steve grins. "He's a keeper."

They parade the turkey into the kitchen and Nancy passes Wyatt a glass of eggnog. Mike and Wyatt start talking animatedly about last week's Saturday Night Live, and everything's... good. Normal. Will

finally lets the tension ease out of his chest.

Not entirely, though. His parents still aren't out here.

Tucker wanders into the kitchen to steal a cookie, not looking up from his Game Boy.

"Tucker, did you say hi to Mr. Wyatt?" Nancy asks.

"Hi," Tucker says flatly, eyes still glued to his Game Boy. "You're out of Will's league."

Wyatt chokes on his eggnog; Nancy and Jonathan look appalled. Mike and Will just laugh.

Finally, Joyce emerges from the hallway, Hopper trailing behind her with his arm all bandaged up. "Is that a turkey?" she gasps when they reach the kitchen. "Where did that come from?"

"Wyatt brought it," Jonathan says pointedly.

"Who the hell's Wyatt?" Hopper says.

Will glances at Jane and then at Hopper and Joyce. "Mom, Hop... this is Wyatt," he says, putting an arm around Wyatt. "My boyfriend." They don't say anything immediately, so Will goes ahead and gets the whole thing over with. "We happened to have a turkey at our apartment." He kind of stresses the word "our."

"Oh, sweetie, that's wonderful," Joyce says. "Hi there, Wyatt, it's so nice to meet you. I'm Joyce." Wyatt stretches a hand out to her but she ignores it and pulls him in for a hug. "And thank you so much for bringing the turkey."

"It's the least I could do," Wyatt says cheerily.

Hopper nudges his wife out of the way to greet Will's boyfriend. "I'm Jim," he says. "I'm the idiot who made our turkey inedible. So... thanks for saving the day, kid."

"Anytime," Wyatt says.

Joyce's eyebrows shoot up. "No, not anytime! No more dinner catching on fire," she says to Hopper. "You get rid of the fryer, alright? Thing's a death trap."

"C'mon, I just need to figure out how to use it right."

"No ."

Joyce and Hopper start bickering like the old married couple that they are. Meanwhile, Jane squeezes Will's hand and says in his ear, "I told you."

After Hopper carves the turkey, they all sit down to eat, Joyce at one end of the table and Jonathan at the other. The cranberry sauce makes its rounds. Mike passes the yams to Steve, who scoops some onto his own plate and then onto Tucker's. Jane floats the stuffing through the air to herself. Wyatt looks impressed but not surprised (after all, AOL Instant Messenger Buddies don't lie, and he's heard plenty about her abilities).

Will sits between his sister and his boyfriend, and he digs into the delicious meal before him, and he feels happy. He feels light.

He feels like he's got more than enough to be thankful for.